

Opelika City Schools

Opelika, Alabama is a small city of about 24,000 people located in the east central area of the state. Opelika City Schools has an enrollment of 4500 students with approximately 63% free and reduced. Our area is predominantly blue-collar industrial, but located 7 miles from the educational community of Auburn University. We have a low unemployment rate, and an average annual family income of \$46,800.00 Opelika was recently named one of the most economically appealing places to live in the United States.

Our school system is operated along business principles much like a corporation. We have never gone to our citizens for a tax referendum that did not pass. It has long been our policy to use our funding wisely to educate every child without parents being constantly asked for donations or funding. We have never allowed vending machines in our schools. Our schools do not have fund-raising drives. Our city supports our schools financially with an extra annual allocation of \$1.7 million. We committed some of those funds to our schools to eliminate fund-raising by students. A few high school fundraisers are still allowed for school clubs, but this is kept to a minimum so that the schools are not a drain on family budgets.

Our Child Nutrition Program is not-for-profit, but self-supporting. We have a closed campus policy, and our program is not competing with school stores, or school vending machines. Therefore, we expect nutrition to be the focus without snack food sales to balance the budget. Participation is 90% system-wide for lunch and 33% for breakfast. Lunches are priced \$1.25 for K-8 and \$1.50 for 9-12. Our system participates in the Alabama statewide purchasing program, which means we get several thousand dollars back in rebates for the food we use. Our program is financially sound. We have built 6 new kitchens in the last few years, have one under construction at this time, and will remodel our high school soon. Our Child Nutrition Program pays for the equipment in new kitchens.

When USDA offered the option in the early 1990's to serve meals based on nutritional standards for students rather than food groups, our child nutrition program adopted NuMenus. We turned off our fryers and purchased steamers. We did intensive training for our cooks to help them learn to cook with spices, instead of the traditional southern ham and bacon seasoning. Participation dropped the first year, then rose to higher participation than pre-NuMenus by the second year. Participation climbed from 84% in the early 1990's and has leveled at 90%. Our first concentration was on seasoning foods to taste good without the fat. We modified recipes that we already had. We learned to purchase frozen fruits and vegetables instead of canned. We served more fresh fruits, but our fresh vegetables were limited to salad bar type items because of the time involved in preparation. Two years ago, we discovered the New North Florida Farmers Cooperative. The Co-op carries liability insurance and requires their members to take classes on use of pesticides. Working through the co-op gives us a level of quality assurance that we would not have buying from a farmer off the street. They pre-process fresh collards, peas, butterbeans, and sweet potato sticks in season. We now offer this variety of fresh vegetables among our other offerings one or two times a month. Students need to see a new item about 10 times before they recognize it as familiar. We

have used over 2000 pounds of collards this school year to date. We hope to continue to expand these offerings as more small farmers join the co-op.

Our appeal to parents is that we offer their children two nutritious meals each day with numerous choices. (See brochure) If they will encourage their children to eat at school and eat a variety of what we offer, they can feel less pressured when their evening meal is a higher fat choice. We hope to continue to improve our meals everyday. We still serve pizza and hamburgers several times per month. We do not serve any one food everyday. Students can buy any regular item on the line a la carte. Ice cream and a non-carbonated sports drink are the only special a la carte items we ever offer. We have justified the ice cream choice, as a means to get students to consume more calcium because so many do not drink milk. At our high school, grades 9-12, we offer a non-carbonated sports drink.

The Child Nutrition Program in Opelika has the support of the administration, faculty, and parents. We do not have to compete with anyone for the food dollars. Our peers across Alabama, and the country have had to add snacks to keep their programs financially sound because of competition from school stores and vending. Until those funding problems are solved, child nutrition programs as a whole will be forced to be child feeding programs without focus on children's well being. A requirement to remove the snack foods from child nutrition programs without addressing the competition will be financially devastating to many systems.

Convincing the adults in schools can be just as difficult as convincing the children. The tremendous rise in Type 2 diabetes among children is staggering. Schools cannot fix all problems, but they do hold their share of blame on this issue when students have high fat, high sugar foods available all through the day. Many students can pass through school without getting any physical activity during the day. Schools are contributing to the obesity issue. Schools provide students more of their meals and snacks during the school year than they get at home. The school environment as a whole must be accountable for what they feed children. Opelika City Schools recognized our responsibility about 10 years ago and began the movement to get where we are today.

Child feeding programs are part of the problem but have the least control to fix them. Most of my colleagues would prefer to feed children healthy choices. Economics has made this virtually impossible. Many kitchens were designed with fried foods as the focal point and do not have the equipment to steam fresh vegetables. Many students have never been exposed to a fresh, cooked vegetable. They only know fried. Change will have to be made with a sound plan, and will take a great deal of work from all areas of education. It will require commitment and creativity. Most importantly, it has not been an easy transition for us and will not be easy for anyone else. Remember we were ahead of the game when we started because we did not have school stores competing with school meal dollars. All we had to worry about was not losing participation and paying the bills.

Mandates to meet dietary standards sound like a great idea on the surface. It is easy to say if Opelika City Schools can do this everyone in the country should be able to. Many schools rely heavily on vending to pay for everything from supplies to club activities. Removing vending and high fat snack foods from cafeterias while allowing school stores to continue to sell those products will bankrupt most child feeding programs in the nation.

Opelika City School System approaches every area in education with the child's well being first. Our child-feeding program teaches nutrition by example, and is the **Child Nutrition Program**. We do not believe that offering students pizza and fries everyday for lunch supports the nutrition education information being taught in the classroom. Our goal is to always support education. Approaching child feeding from a child nutrition perspective requires re-thinking most long held beliefs about what children will and will not eat, and requires us to be the adult when it comes to balancing what is popular versus what is more nutritious. That works in Opelika, Alabama!

Melanie Payne
Child Nutrition Program Director
Opelika City Schools
P.O. Box 2469
Opelika, AL 36803-2469
(334) 745-9700